

## MURDER IN THE PARK

Crime is to be found almost everywhere in this sinful world. Brazilians read about gang killings in American cities, and conclude that the United States is a very lawless place. They have murder too; but it is generally more quiet.

Actually, murder is distressingly common in Brazil, not only in the large cities, but in the smaller places as well. Perhaps it is due to the passionate nature of the Latin race; or maybe the ubiquitous cachaça is responsible. The Brazilians are not overly given to reflecting beforehand on the consequences of an act. Besides, a fellow may not be caught, and if caught may not be convicted. Even if convicted, prison is not so bad after all, and there is no death penalty in Brazil for murder. An ancient grudge may be settled in the public square in the midst of a festa; or a man may be waylaid in the night; or a country dance may end in a brawl. I knew a young doctor, who aspired to be a surgeon, who worked at the local hospital, and used to tell lurid stories of the cases brought in for treatment. "They brought a man in last night, cut all to pieces. We had to take so many stitches in him... His this or that slashed right through..." "Well, how is he? Is he going to get well?" "No, he died, but..." — though some of them did make almost miraculous recoveries.

Brazilian men, especially of the laboring classes, almost always go about armed, generally with some sort of knife or dagger. In the police station in Recife I saw a fascinating collection of cutlery that had been taken from prisoners. On one occasion we had a servant girl about fifteen years old, named Julieta. Although her family lived in the town, she usually slept in a little room adjoining the garage. One night there was some sort of dance on at a low dive nearby, and about eleven o'clock, as I sat reading, there was a knock at the door. I went to the door, and found there Julieta's brother, whom I knew by sight. He asked if Julieta was in her room. I told him I had no idea, but that he might look if he chose. He said that he had seen her at the dance, which was no fit place for her to be, and that he had come to take her home — and box her ears, I gathered. She had fled from the dance on seeing him. We went together and looked in her room, and in the garage, without finding her. (I after-

wards learned that she was hiding in the water closet, where we failed to look.) There was a storeroom, which fastened with a spring lock, of which the key had been lost, and we were accustomed to open it with a kitchen knife. Thinking she might be hidden there, I said, "Let me get a knife from the kitchen to open this". "How about a dagger?" the young man replied, drawing out one with about a nine inch blade, as casually as I might take out a fountain pen. It was just standard equipment, apparently.

The most brutal and flagrant murder that I remember happening in the community where I lived was committed by a man just out of the army. As we learned afterwards, he had been a recognized "bad man" for some time, and had committed several murders before, but for some reason had gone unpunished, or had got off lightly. His delight had been to hear of a dance or party somewhere, and go and break it up, terrorizing all the people. He had been drafted into the army, and had served his time, and was discharged. And not surprisingly, he decided to celebrate his discharge by getting drunk. In vino veritas -- the alcohol brought out his innate liking for murder, and he decided he wanted to kill somebody. He had no grudge against anybody in particular; he just wanted to kill somebody. Perhaps he should have been considered a homicidal maniac, and shut up in an asylum; but most of us thought he was just a bad man, who should have been put out of the way.

Having thus the motive, means were not lacking, and an opportunity might easily be found. He equipped himself with a peixeira of suitable dimensions, ground to razor sharpness, stationed himself in a path through the park, and resolved to stab the first man who should come along. It so chanced that three came together; but our hero, nothing daunted, accosted all three. Two were soldiers -- a private and a sergeant; the other was a poor, hard working porter, who had a large family. Taken by surprise, and having no reason to suspect any evil design, they had no opportunity to defend themselves, or even to run. "What does this mean?" one of them asked, on being stopped. "It means this", was the answer, and he quickly stabbed all three. They were taken to the hospital for treatment, and at first there seemed to be some hope for their recovery, but within two days all three died.



The murderer was promptly arrested, and held in jail. Popular feeling against him was very high, and the extreme penalty of the law seemed pitifully inadequate to punish a crime of such barbarity. However, there was no talk of any lynching. But sometimes Justice finds a way to transcend human laws. I heard one man say, "If I had been the officer sent to arrest that man, I think he would have 'resisted arrest'. And I afterwards heard that he had died in prison.